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Operation Secure Mexico

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Introduction:

The following article is based upon numerous press reports concerning the announcement of President Vicente Fox on 11 June 2005 concerning Operation Secure Mexico (*Operativo México Seguro*) and the results of the operation. The operation was to last from 11 to 17 June 2005 in Mexico's northern border states of Tamaulipas, Chihuahua, Sonora, and Baja California Norte. It was also to run concurrently in the state of Sinaloa on the Sea of Cortez.

As of this date, it has since been expanded into Mexico State and Mexico City. The operation may also include the states of Quintana Roo and Veracruz. It will also be run on the Mexican southern border.

The operation is a joint federal, state and local law-enforcement operation. On the federal level the following agencies participated: Federal Attorney General's Office (PGR)(*Procuraduría General de República*); Federal Investigative Agency (AFI)(*Agencia Federal de Investigación*); Secretariat of the Interior (Governance)(SEGOB)(*Secretaría de Gobernación*); Secretariat of Defense (SEDENA)(*Secretaría de la Defensa Nacional*); Secretariat of the Navy (SEMAR)(*Secretaría de la Marina*); Secretariat of Public Security(SSP)(*Secretaría de Seguridad Pública*); and the Federal Preventive Police (PFP)(*Policía Federal Preventiva*). All information contained in this document has a Date of Information (DOI) of 1 June 2005 or later. All Sources are Mexican Official press releases, Mexican Press, and/or Central American Newspaper reports.

Drug Cartels in Mexico

According to the PGR, Mexican drug cartels have consolidated to the point that they are the principal exporters of cocaine into the U.S. The number of cartels varies according to the official source making the press release. According to the PGR, the two primary and largest groups are those controlled by Joaquín Guzmán and by Osiel Cárdenas. Other official sources state that there are eight primary cartels operating in Mexican territory. Most sources, however, agree that the primary cartels operating along the northern Mexican border are located in Cd. Juárez, Sinaloa, Tijuana, Gulf, and Milenio. These sources also agree that there are a number of other

smaller cartels operating in Central and Southern Mexico which are engaged in distributing drugs and enticing young Mexicans into drug consumption.

Start of Operation Secure Mexico

Since the beginning of 2005, more than 550 individuals have been murdered in the northern border states and in the Federal District. All of the murders are believed to have a nexus with the Mexican drug cartels.

Approximately three weeks before the beginning of Operation Secure Mexico, President Fox announced that his government would soon implement an operation directed against the drug cartels, especially in Sinaloa against Joaquín Guzmán and his cartel. Fox stated that the purpose of the operation was to fight organized crime and guarantee the security and safety of potential victims of the drug cartel violence.

Spokesmen for the Fox administration stated that the violence was caused by the cartels “making adjustments” concerning the various drug routes and changes in cartel leadership due to arrests and internecine warfare.

The primary target of the operation would be Sinaloa, Baja California, Chihuahua, Nuevo León, Tamaulipas, Quintana Roo, Veracruz, and other areas in the center of Mexico to include the Federal District.

All of the cartels have compromised a number of local and municipal law enforcement officers and agencies. For this reason, the majority of the forces participating in Operation Secure Mexico are federal forces.

The operation was to run until 17 June 2005 but has been extended in certain areas indefinitely.

Plata o plomo (Silver or Lead = Pay or Die)

On 5 June 2005, an AFI agent, assigned to the Mexico City International Airport, was on vacation in his home state of Chihuahua. He was shot and slightly wounded by unidentified assailants. On 8 June 2005, while recovering in a private hospital in Cd. Chihuahua, he was visited by two agents from the State ministerial police. While the two state agents were visiting the AFI agent, an armed commando broke into the AFI agent's room and killed all three.

On June 11, while 26 AFI agents were arriving in Nuevo Laredo, two other agents, Abraham Maldonado Alonso and Fernando Acosta Hernández, were shot and killed in a commercial district in Mexico City. After an investigation, a third agent, Jesús Coronado López, was arrested for the murders. López was a member of the AFI Special Operations Group. It appears as if the murders and dispute were over a drug deal gone bad. After giving his statement to AFI interrogators, the suspect managed to take a pistol from one of the agents and then committed suicide by shooting himself in the head.

On 13 June 2005, Edmundo Fernández Corral was executed on the outskirts of Cd. Juárez by unknown assailants. Fernández was the Chihuahua Municipal Chief of Police Special Forces. He had occupied the position for less than nine hours before he was assassinated.

On 16 June 2005, Pedro Madrigal was shot and killed at the entryway to his home in Mexico City. Madrigal had been a member of the PFP since October 1999. In November 2004, he was transferred to the Mexico City International Airport as Coordinator for PFP activities at the airport. In the following months, the efficiency of the PFP at the airport improved tremendously. For example, on 1 June 2004 he discovered 300 kilo of cocaine hidden in boxes containing winter clothing. The boxes had come from Colombia. He was known for spotting illegal aliens and those who were trafficking in illegal humans.

Operation Secure Mexico by State

Tamaulipas



More than 2000 security personnel from the Army, PFP, and AFI took control of the Tamaulipan towns of Matamoros, Reynosa, and Nuevo Laredo.

According to a Fox spokesman, Operation Secure Mexico has the objective of searching more than 150 buildings in Tamaulipas which are used for the sale of drugs and to store “illicit materials”.

More than 2,000 individuals from SEDENA, AFI, PFP, and some state law enforcement agencies are participating in the operation in Tamaulipas. Most of the SEDENA personnel are members of the Special Forces Airmobile Group (GAFES) (*Grupo Aeromóvil de Fuerzas Especiales*), intelligence personnel and operatives, and Military Police assigned to the PFP.

Matamoros and Reynosa

More than 700 individuals from the various federal agencies who were assigned to the operation moved into these two cities on 11 June 2005.

Checkpoints were set up near Matamoros on the following highways at the exits and entrances to the city – Matamoros-Reynosa Highway, Matamoros-Cd. Victoria Highway, Matamoros-Playa Bagdad Highway, Matamoros-Valle Hermoso Highway, and on the “Sendero Nacional” highway.

Checkpoints were also set up in and near Reynosa on the following highways at the exits and entrances to the city – Colosio Boulevard; Reynosa-Matamoros Highway; the Riverbank Highway; Reynosa-Monterey Highway; Rio Bravo Highway; and the Reynosa-San Fernando Highway.

Federal law enforcement officials have also been provided a number of arrest warrants for a variety of crimes to include drug trafficking, homicide and rape.

Nuevo Laredo



Military, PFP, and AFI personnel examine a truck abandoned in Nuevo Laredo. The vehicle had 18 bullet holes in it; probably from an AK-47. Photo Carlos Ramos Mamahua

Personnel assigned to Operation Secure Mexico were able to free more than 40 individuals who had been kidnapped and were being held for ransom.

Secure Mexico operations included the confinement of more than 700 Nuevo Laredo city police and city employees in the police headquarters. Weapons were taken from the city police. Background investigations and drug tests were administered to all city police. Until the 700 police officers and employees were cleared, their duties were performed by state law enforcement agencies. After the screening and background investigations, 150 Nuevo Laredo city police and personnel were detained.

Forty-one of the state preventive police were transported to and incarcerated in Mexico City. These state officers are believed to have participated in the firefight with AFI forces in front of City Police headquarters at the beginning of the operation on 11 June 2005. The PGR is currently investigating all 41 officers.

At midnight on 11 June 2005, federal officials and military personnel wearing anti-ballistic vests set up checkpoints on the international bridges to check vehicles entering and leaving Mexico.

On the evening of 26 June 2005, AFI officials in conjunction with Army, PFP, and State Preventive Police rescued a total of 44 persons from three different locations in Nuevo Laredo. One was transported to a local hospital because of wounds received from physical torture. The others were all transported to Mexico City during the night of 27 June 2005. In Mexico City, they were to undergo screening by PGR officials before a final determination in their case would be made. Victims ranged in age from 14 to 52. Most of the younger victims were females.

During the raid, two vehicles with Texas plates were seized – a Pontiac Boneville with Texas plate G22FKK and a Ford Windstar with Texas plate 8CFP19.

On 30 Jun 2005, approximately 100 SIEDO, AFI, and SEDENA personnel, under observation of the FBI, searched a building in Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, where the officers believed organized crime groups hid bodies of victims. They found evidence of bone, clothing, documents, and shoes, which are being sent to the Federal District for further analysis. The site was apparently used by corrupt Municipal Police officers and members of the Comando Negro [Black Command], a group allegedly composed of Gulf Cartel and Los Zetas members. As of 30 June 2005, a Mexico City judge has ordered that 39 of the 44 kidnapped victims remain in Federal custody. Five of the victims were released to their families. No reason was given for the remand to federal custody.

Coahuila

On 20 June 2005, Operation Secure Mexico was expanded into Coahuila. The Governor of Coahuila has stated that he, his administration, and private enterprise in Coahuila fully support Operation Secure Mexico, especially in light of the violence and drug trafficking in Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas. They appreciate the federal support, especially in the border cities of Piedras Negras and Acuña. Sixty-one soldiers have been assigned to Acuña, Coahuila. Soldiers set up checkpoints at the entrances and exits to both cities.

Chihuahua

At the start of Operation Secure Mexico (11 June 2005), the Acting Governor of Chihuahua, Fernando Rodríguez Moreno, stated in a press conference that although some assistance from the Federal Government had been requested by state officials, no one had anticipated such an occupation as was demonstrated by the Operation forces. He went on to say that Operation Secure Mexico was not and would not be a priority for the current administration. State officials had not anticipated the “large numbers” of military men and units to be assigned to the state, although they appeared to accept the concept of more PGR agents being sent to Chihuahua.

On 20 June 2005, the Governor of Chihuahua, José Reyes Baeza Terrazas, announced that he would soon implement “Operation Secure Chihuahua,” in which he invited the federal government to participate. Reyes emphasized that Secure Chihuahua would not be run in the same manner as Operation Secure Mexico. There would not be such an emphasis on police and military forces as in the federal operation; rather, Secure Chihuahua would emphasize prevention instead of detention. Chihuahua would be made secure through economic and humane measures. Operation Secure Chihuahua is not intended to produce such spectacular and violent results as seen in Operation Secure Mexico. Secure Chihuahua is intended, among other goals, to reform the state legal system, register the “*chuecos*” (illegally imported vehicles), and better equip the state and local police forces. He added that he still expected the PGR to perform its constitutional duties in the state of Chihuahua. This reference to the PGR and its duties is an allusion to the constitutional responsibilities of the Attorney General and his office. The PGR is the only agency in Mexico that can prosecute any crime dealing with drugs – transportation, solicitation, selling and possession. In Mexico, drug crimes are a federal offense, not a state offense, regardless of the quantity.



Mexican soldiers and police arrive at the U.S.-Mexican

border and other regions for the start of Operation Secure Mexico - a federal operation to combat drug trafficking violence.

Photo: EFE/Cambio Sonora

Sonora

Little has been written in the press concerning Operation Secure Mexico in the state of Sonora. Operatives are present in the three major cities of Cd. Obregon, Hermosillo, and Nogales.

In rural Sonora, approximately 300 state law-enforcement officers have set up interdiction points to capture drug traffickers attempting to flee the cities.

Baja California

As of 14 June 2005, Operation Secure Mexico forces had established four checkpoints around Tijuana and three around Mexicali. Each city had approximately 120 PFP agents, 50 intelligence officers, and 25 AFI agents. Municipal and state law enforcement agencies were also participating in the operation. Military personnel were held in reserve for any violence that might occur. Within the first few days of the operation, 25 individuals were arrested on outstanding warrants or because they were transporting illegal drugs.

Sinaloa

Since 2003, the state of Sinaloa has had its own Operation Secure Sinaloa. This program is currently being augmented by Operation Secure Mexico. The joint federal-state operation is concentrating in the cities of Mazatlán, Culiacán, and Navolato. Federal forces in Mazatlán number approximately 450. These agents have set up check points at the southern and northern entrances to the city. Roving patrols are active in the port and nightclub areas of the city.

From 28 May through 20 June 2005, this joint operation in Sinaloa has produced the following results:

- More than 25,000 vehicle searches;
- Detained 386 illegal immigrants;
- Seized more than 2.0 metric tons of marijuana;
- Seized 50 kilograms of crystal meth;
- Seized 22 kilograms of cocaine;
- Seized 130 kilograms of marijuana seed;
- Seized more than 211,000 psychotropic pills;
- Brought the arrest of Miguel Ángel Guzmán Loera, brother of Joaquín Guzmán AKA el Chapo.

Of particular note in Sinaloa was the search of a number of houses of alleged drug dealers. The following is a direct quote from the Borders Security Team's *Mexico Newsbriefs* dated 22 June 2005:

“SIEDO, PFP, and Mexican Army personnel conducting Operation Secure Mexico (*México Seguro*) searched nine residences in Culiacán, Sinaloa. The residences allegedly were associated with the criminal organizations led by Joaquín Guzmán Loera aka El Chapo Guzmán and Ismael Zambada García, aka El Mayo Zambada .

“The officers seized six vehicles, three firearms, various rounds of different calibers, over \$US 5000.00 cash, and various documents. The officers also arrested Luis Alejo HERRERA Elizalde .

“The first operation took place at 2549 Second Street in Colonia Diez de Abril , where officers seized documents and communications equipment.

“The second operation took place 1615 SECOFI in the Colonia Fovissste Humaya, where officers seized two vehicles and various .223 caliber rounds.

“The third operation took place at 975 Profesora Josefina Chang Street in Colonia Juan de Dios Bátiz , where officers seized various rounds of different calibers, \$(USD) 5,028.00 cash, and various documents.

“The fourth operation took place at 1626 Canario in Colonia Sinaloa, where officers seized a 9mm pistol, a Stratus model vehicle, and documents.

“The fifth operation took place at 1031 Privada Monte Cárpatos in the Montebello subdivision (*fraccionamiento*), where officers seized an armored Cherokee SUV, an AR-15, magazines, deposits and documents.

“The sixth operation took place at 245 Pablo Macías Valenzuela Street in Colonia Ampliación Buenos Aires, where officers located different documents.

“The seventh operation took place at 5136 París Street in the Villaverde subdivision, where officers located a .22 caliber pistol and a Jeep Liberty SUV that had been reported stolen.

“The eight operations took place at 3896 Fray Andrés Pérez Rivas Street in the Colonia Guadalupe Victoria, where officers seized documents and a Jeep Grand Cherokee SUV.

“The ninth operation took place at 4013 San Antonio Street, where no evidence relating to the investigation was found.”

Overall Results in Baja California, Sinaloa, Sonora, and Tamaulipas

From 11 June 2005 to 19 June 2005, Operation Secure Mexico has produced the following results:

- Freeing of 43 kidnapping victims in Nuevo Laredo;
- 424 arrest warrants served;
- 486 individuals arrested;
- 72 weapons seized;
- 51,000 vehicles confiscated;
- More than \$(USD)1,080,000 confiscated;
- More than 2,000,000 pesos confiscated;
- 2.250 tons of Marijuana seized;
- 9 kilograms of Cocaine seized;
- Approximately 200,000 psychotropic pills;
- Unidentified quantities of heroin, ice, and methamphetamines seized.

Public Reaction to Operation Secure Mexico

Tijuana, Baja California Norte

The mayor of Jorge Hank Rhon, Mayor of Tijuana, Baja California, stated that Operation Secure Mexico did not meet expectations. He accused the federal government of posting results “very distinct from reality.”

State of Veracruz

Governor Herrera has made statements to the effect that Operation Secure Mexico Seguro was not necessary, as the state of Veracruz had its own security program which was extremely effective. Until recently, Veracruz had not been in the forefront of the cartels’ drug war. According to a recent editorial, however, since Fidel Herrera became governor of Veracruz, the number of “Sinaloa-Reynosa-Nuevo Laredo” style murders has increased dramatically.

The editorialist goes on to ask whether the murder of Raul Gibb, president of the Poza Rica newspaper La Opinión, the murder of judicial police, and the murder of investigative agents were just “payback.”

The editorial also questioned where the new governor obtained his campaign money. Allegedly, some of the money was received from “Mr. Lemon,” a lemon farmer with two airplanes and 2,000 hectares of lemons and other “businesses.”

Governor Herrera is not enthusiastic about the federal operation. He is putting state emphasis on Operation Veracruz Seguro, a state operation similar to that in Chihuahua.

Nuevo Laredo

There were two demonstrations against Operation Secure Mexico in Nuevo Laredo. The first allegedly involved the families of the detained policemen. The policemen had not been paid their normal salary for the 15th of the month. The families were demanding the paychecks.

The second demonstration was held near city hall. The demonstration was to protest the “extreme violence” of the federal forces. An unidentified federal spokesman stated that it appeared as if those participating in the second demonstration had been hired by the various drug cartels.

The below cartoon was published in a local Nuevo Laredo newspaper. It satirizes the alleged links between the city police and the drug cartels.

Mexico City

The mayor of Mexico City has stated that he welcomes the federal forces into his city. As of the date of this report, the federal forces are already operating on the border between Mexico City and Mexico State.

Future Operations

Quintana Roo

The first announcements of Operation Secure Mexico included the statement that the operation was to be expanded into other areas of the country. Quintana Roo and the southern border were specifically mentioned in the news releases and press conferences. As of the date of this article, there have been no open source reports of federal forces operating in Quintana Roo.

Southern Border

Also as of the date of this report, CISEN officials announced that CISEN operatives had closed the border between Mexico and Belize. The announcement does not say which agency is assisting CISEN in conducting this operation.

Comments

Kidnap Victims

The discovery of the alleged kidnap victims is one of the most surprising results of the entire operation.



Man with goatee: "There goes a dangerous drug lord, all alone and in broad daylight....We should call the police."

Bald man: "Are you crazy?"

The kidnap victims were not immediately released to family members but all were transported to Mexico City. That some of the males would be retained in custody is normal. However, there were a number of minor and young females who normally would have been returned to their families immediately upon rescue.

